

# Connecting America

## *Rural Communities in an IP World*

As our communications tools evolve, our need to communicate remains. Policymakers considering rules that determine how Americans will be able to communicate in an interconnected world must know what rural communities need.

### What's on the line...

Rural people need landline, wireless, and broadband communication tools to call their doctors, apply for jobs, pursue educational opportunities, launch businesses, remain connected to their loved ones, and communicate with elected officials. We need policies that prioritize our education, health care, economic development, and civic participation. Federal and state policy makers must support efforts that invest in rural communities and are accountable to rural consumers.

### A persistent need

Rural, low-income, and Native communities constitute the majority of those left unserved today. According to the Federal Communications Commission 8th Broadband Progress Report, fixed broadband networks do not reach 19 million Americans. Of those unserved by fixed broadband networks, 14.5 million live in rural and nearly a third in Tribal lands.

Unavailability of service and high prices are two of the top barriers that rural communities cite to access wireless, broadband, and basic telephone services.

Furthermore, even basic telephone service is not ubiquitous in our country. In Indian Country, over 31 percent do not have basic phone service.<sup>1</sup> And across the states, almost 10.6 million people depend on the Lifeline program to be able to afford a telephone line.<sup>2</sup>

19 million Americans cannot access fixed broadband

14.5 million rural people cannot access fixed broadband

1/3 of Tribal areas cannot access fixed broadband

100 million do not subscribe

97 % Americans have telephone access

Only 67 % in Tribal communities have telephone access

10.6 million Americans need assistance to pay for a landline

31% of 87 million residential telephone subscriptions are VoIP

<sup>1</sup> *Universal Service Monitoring Report*, CC Docket No. 98-202. Federal Communications Commission. 2010

## The value of consumer protections

- Guaranteed service
- Guaranteed 911 service
- Guaranteed maintenance and repair
- Unlimited local calls
- Public Utilities Commission investigates consumer complaints
- Guaranteed affordable, reliable, comparable service
- Two week power back-up
- Any phone any provider
- Public Utilities Commission disputes bill charges

## Opportunities

### *Landline Telephones: The Most Accessible & Reliable Communications Tool in America*

As rural people, we have historically experienced lack of access to communications tools. Having access to communications tools helps us participate in society, and for some rural people, basic telephone service is the only point of connection. As we increase access to wireless and broadband communications, policymakers must ensure they do not cut the most accessible and reliable communications tool leaving rural people outside of society.

### *Commitment to Universal Service*

Since 1936, our nation has proudly upheld Universal Service, the principle to advance telecommunications services to the least served including low-income, rural, insular, and high cost areas. Our commitment to Universal Service resulted in 97% telephone access across the country. However, Universal Service regulations are still needed now: 67% of Tribal communities still do not have access to a landline, and 10.6 million people depend on the USF Lifeline program to be able to afford a landline. The U.S. must not be the first industrialized nation to retreat from the goal of achieving 100% connection of basic telephone service. Instead, the success of Universal Service regulations should be the regulatory base for Universal Wireless and Broadband Services.

### *Maintain Consumer Protections*

Current consumer protections guarantee service, affordability, maintenance and repair, emergency services, power back-up, and timely resolution of complaints. These protections should not be reserved for landline consumers only. Consumers must be protected across all communications services.

### *Prioritize National Public Safety*

No one should be denied access to reliable life-saving 911 services. Therefore, IP communications tools must prioritize our national public safety and guarantee connection to emergency services.

### *Invest in Rural*

Increasing access to all communications tools is an investment in rural people. Conversely, taking away access to any of those tools is a divestment. Policymakers must ensure that rules increase investment in rural areas and people, instead of eliminating services.

### *Make Connect America Funds Available to Non-Eligible Telecommunications Carriers*

Policies that prioritize Local Ownership and Investment in Community can help close the digital divide that persists in our country. For example, non-profits, municipalities, American Indian Tribes, community institutions, and co-ops should be allowed to apply and receive Connect America Funds.

### *Support Municipal Broadband*

Bills that ban local communities from building or supporting municipal broadband networks effectively eliminate opportunities to create the networks we need. Policymakers must support policies that allow rural areas to seek our own communications solutions.